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REVIEW

New Technologies and Moral Duties: Valuing the Person as a Means to an End

SHAWN H. E. HARMON

School of Law, University of Edinburgh

Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty, by Lorenzo Magnani, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 288 pp., US\$90.00

Many of us will be familiar with Kant's ethical imperative, which states that we must act only in such a way that we might at the same time accept that it should become a universal law. And many of us will be equally familiar with Kant's related proposition that, as he puts it:

[M]an, and in general every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed at the same time as an end. (Kant, 1785: 95)

Relying on rationality and moral agency, Kant separated out humans from other things and posited that they deserve special treatment, saying that persons, because of their nature are ends in themselves and cannot be arbitrarily treated. In essence, to treat someone solely as a 'means' is to 'instrumentalise' that person inappropriately and to so instrumentalise someone is to act immorally (toward them).

Although there are obviously other important moral theories, it is arguable that none have been more persuasive or influential than Kant's in the 21st century setting of medical treatments, biotechnologies and other new technologies, and this is evidenced by its often explicit adoption in the human rights paradigm, which has become so dominant (even if its most important instruments are just as often observed in the breach as in the realisation). Consider, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the Council of Europe's Biomedicine Convention (1997), UNESCO's Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights (1997), and others.

The notion of human dignity is also central to the ethical theory Magnani sets out in *Morality in a Technological World*. The book responds to two troubling facts in particular: the all-too-frequent absence of respect for human dignity; and an increasingly dehumanised social setting, which Magnani describes as having a 'ubiquitous technological presence' through which human behaviour (and the human-generated technosphere) can have a tremendous impact on the world (pp. xiii & 8). By way of example, he cites overpopulation and new biotechnologies and their consequences, which include ozone depletion, noxious gas production, biodiversity destruction and genetic mutation. He claims that this modern techno-culture raises unique moral issues (from ecological rescue, to biotech safety, to human hybridisation, to cyberprivacy) and duties (the ultimate one being to respect human dignity).

Magnani's theory is exceptional, however, in that he turns the anti-instrumentalisation discourse of human dignity on its head. Citing the wildlife preservation context as an example, he says:

[T]here is a continuous delegation of moral values to externalities; this may ... cause some people to complain that wildlife [for example] receives greater moral and legal protection than, for example, disappearing cultural traditions. I wondered what reasoning process would result in a nonhuman thing's being valued over a living, breathing person and asked ... what might be done to elevate the status of human beings. One solution ... is to re-examine the respect we have developed for particular externalities and then to use those things as a vehicle to return value to people. (p. x)

In short, Magnani offers the radical suggestion that human beings can and should be treated as 'things' (a traditionally disparaged proposition), and can thus come to be respected as things that have, in the modern world, been ascribed more value than (some) people. By doing so, he claims that we can 're-appropriate' the moral esteem that we have 'lavished' on external things/objects such as endangered species, works of art, information and information systems. An integral element of this approach, he says, is to recognise that our modern techno- and knowledge-based world imposes on us a duty to produce and apply ethical knowledge in keeping with scientific knowledge. One duty, grounded on Platonic conceptions, is to produce more knowledge, and thereby aid in the avoidance of wrong-doing through ignorance. The other duty is to use this knowledge to effect positive change in the world (i.e. improve the lives of humans who suffer). Indeed, through his engagement with, and inversion of, the Kantian-inspired debates around instrumentalisation, Magnani contributes to a growing body of work concerned with the discovery, recognition and imposition of duties (as opposed to individualistic rights) in the healthcare context (O'Neil, 2002, Harris, 2005, Harmon, 2006). The other main argument is that morality must match the dynamism of the technological setting to which it is being applied. Morality is not observed, it is performed and interactive; a claim that is also finding more and more support (O'Malley *et al.*, 2007).

Magnani begins by exploring the idea that humans and nonhuman things are co-dependent, and people can and should be respected as 'things' of value. As the basis of his argument, he claims that people are information- and knowledge-carriers and might be valued as such (p. 28). Moreover, he argues that humans are deeply integrated with these information artefacts (and other nonhuman objects). Humans and nonhumans are 'folded into' one another insofar as we delegate action to external things (objects, tools, artefacts) that thereby share our human existence with us; we experience 'an exchange of human and nonhuman properties' which causes a 'mixing up of objectivity and subjectivity' (p.25). Given that this state is the hallmark of the modern 'civilised life', the characterisation of 'people as means' is all the more appropriate and helpful.

In chapter 2, drawing on Robin Baker, Tom Beauchamp, John Harris, and Bonnie Steinbock, Magnani explores some of the moral issues and arguments surrounding reproductive technologies (particularly IVF) as well as various other (soon-to-exist) medical technologies (reproductive cloning, cortical micro-electrodes, and so on), many of which evince at least a tacit acceptance of organic and inorganic marriages for curative purposes. In rehearsing these arguments and technological possibilities, Magnani seeks to demonstrate that humans are increasingly integrated with nonhuman artefacts and technical processes, and are therefore deserving of a new understanding (p.42 at note 4). His overall purpose is to demonstrate that it is moral to recognise people – who are increasingly human-artefact hybrids – as

‘things’. Indeed, given the pace and direction of technology, there is an increasingly urgent need for people to be ‘respected as things’.

Chapter 3 commences from the proposition that knowledge in the technological age has become a much more important duty than ever before because of the profound consequences it can have on our wellbeing and dignity. (Magnani, 2007, 65) Scientific knowledge allows us to understand better the external events of nature (and to develop artefacts that serve us within that environment), and moral knowledge helps us to anticipate better what artefacts might jeopardise our dignity. As such, we must be committed to knowledge-generation, for knowledge shapes how and what we think, makes possible intentionality and free will, heightens consciousness and makes possible the realisation of dignity (p.91).

In chapter 4, Magnani makes the case for knowledge generation and dissemination as a means of encouraging creative, model-based, ‘manipulative ethical abduction’ (i.e. discovering new ideas and theories by manipulating external objects and representations as is done in the scientific realm) (pp.93-118 & 184-197), particularly around ‘moral mediators’ (‘entities we can construct in order to bring about certain ethical effects [and which] ... may exist as beings, objects or structures ...’) (p.248). However, he cautions that judgments must be made about the quality and type of information considered morally valuable, and to that end, he explores some of the moral issues that are implicated by our informational capabilities in the *Cyber Age*. He states that information technologies are increasingly ubiquitous, are compounding our hybridisation, and are threatening human dignity in more insidious ways than the reproductive technologies discussed in chapter 2. Though greatly valued, they can be immoral through their erosion of privacy, which is fundamental to human freedom and intimacy (and therefore dignity). If dignity is to flourish in this new, informational environment, we must interrogate some of the internal conditions which erode it.

Thus, chapter 5 explores our personal relationship with knowledge and the part that relationship plays in determining the level of freedom we enjoy. It is premised on the belief that people frequently deny the fact that choice exists; they create a simple world in which there are no alternatives so as to shield themselves from the responsibility and anxiety of difficult decision-making – they self-delude and thereby commit ‘bad faith’ insofar as decisions are externalised and limited. (p.129) They thus artificially reduce their own freedom and that of others who are affected by their actions (or inactions). Magnani concludes that living without important information – whether we have resisted it or are unaware of it – is to create a ‘toxic state of ignorance’ which feeds ‘bad faith’ and leads to poor decisions and a corrosion of wellbeing. (Magnani, 2007, 160)

In the final two chapters, Magnani shifts focus, offering the methodological foundation associated with the moral reasoning/deliberation he is espousing. In chapter 6, he contends that morality is the effort to guide one’s conduct by reasons (i.e. to do what there are the best reasons for doing while giving weight to the interests of individuals affected by the conduct). As such, we need to develop sound principles for choosing actions and appropriate ways of reasoning that permit us to apply them so as to facilitate ‘moral coherence’, which, in turn, helps us to explore the multidimensional character of ethical problems. To that end, he suggests ‘manipulative abduction’ (highlighted above). In chapter 7, he challenges casuistry and attempts to illustrate that ‘abduction’ (i.e. reasoning to hypotheses) is central to ethical deliberation insofar as it demonstrates that judgments, especially those in complicated scenarios, do not always derive from rigid, well-established principles.

Rather, they often come from verbal argument that takes into account particular circumstances, precedents and exceptions. This, of course, is particularly the case in techno-settings where advances create unforeseen challenges (pp.215-240).

Ultimately, Magnani's theory can be characterised as a 'combination of ethics, epistemology, and cognitive science', and he sums up by stating:

I am convinced that moral concerns involve reasoning that bears important parallels to reasoning in the sciences and that these similarities can help us to address the problem of moral deliberation in cases and problems not anticipated by moral philosophers. (p.248)

Magnani claims that our modern (technological) capabilities impose greater efforts of foresight (and the generation of information to facilitate that foresight) than ever before, arguing that ethical behaviour requires that we assume long-range duties commensurate with the scope of our powers (p. 95). While this argument is generally sensible and well-founded, one must be cognizant of the limitations related to horizon-gazing (Williams, 2006).

Additionally, Magnani encourages us to find new ways to integrate morality and the modern world (i.e. to increase the effectiveness of morality in modern contexts), and he does this by instrumentalising the person, transforming them into an informational artefact. This prompts two thoughts. First, one can certainly appreciate the desire to better integrate and invigorate morality, though one might not be as convinced as Magnani that existing ethical theories are not up to the task of evaluating behaviour and pointing it in the proper direction. We probably need simply to heed what evidence and rationality are telling us; it is not so much a failure of existing ethical theories that has brought us to where we are, but rather a failure of actors to act within known (or knowable) moral parameters. The formulation of a wholly new theory will not change that human shortcoming. Second, while his approach – instrumentalising the person – recognises and tries to capture some of the value we have attributed to technological artefacts and innovations, it is an approach fraught with danger. It assumes (or relies on the assumption) that we all hold artefacts and technologies in high regard, which is almost certainly not the case. Moreover, he seems to suggest that hybridisation (of human and tech) is inevitable and to be encouraged, and this too will not be universally embraced. Having said that, the exploration of a theory specifically tailored for the new technological setting is valuable, and this is a useful contribution to the techno-moral discourse and to scholarship more generally.

As one works through Magnani's treatise on morality in a dynamic setting, one can expect to be baffled, delighted, bemused, and enlightened in turns, and, as a consequence, to be the better for it. But this is no easy journey, and Magnani's assurance that his approach 'allow[s] us to reorient and modernize philosophical discussions ... in a way that avoids the formal treatments of traditional moral philosophy,' (p.248) did not, as it turns out, mean that his theory was any more comprehensible (to the non-philosopher) than any of his antecedents. In short, *Morality in a Technological World* is dense and demanding and suffers from inaccessibility, and though this may be the fault of the reviewer's mind rather than the theory or the prose, it is safe to say that this book is *not* for everyone (indeed it may well be that it is not intended for a non-philosophical audience), and one can be confident that one would be unable to apply the theory in a practical setting.

The book's difficulty is compounded by its structure, which does not flow from one topic to the next, building the argument as it goes. For example, given that it was continually referred to throughout, one would have preferred to see the methodological content (chapters 6 and 7) at the outset, followed by (1) arguments about the importance of knowledge, (2) defences of knowledge as duty, and (3) explorations and defences of the new way of treating/conceptualising people within the moral evaluative process. This structural problem may be because the book tries to serve multiple ends (e.g. to offer and defend a science-based methodology, to explore 'knowledge as duty', to reverse thinking about 'humans as things/means'), but structuring it in accordance with those ends would have helped this reviewer.

To close, it is worth reiterating a concern and highlighting two positives. First, one may not be enamoured with Magnani's approach to instrumentality because of the assumptions that appear to underlie it: that technologies, which are often contingent and disposable, are widely valued and a good touchstone for defending the dignity of humans. One should be careful about encouraging the equation of dignity with such temporally and geographically limited, and often contested, artefacts. Harkening back to Kant, one could argue that, despite the consumer, commercial or other value we place on these artefacts, this simply devalues humans overmuch, ignoring the special status that has been the struggle of centuries to recognise and fulfil. Nevertheless, the broad message contained in this book – that our burgeoning knowledge imposes on us multiplying duties and the need to be absolutely vigilant about meeting them – is something that can and should be embraced by all. Although the idea of 'duties' may not resonate universally, the limitations of 'rights talk' is starkly exposed by current global disease burdens and the hollowness of the widely claimed right to health. A discourse reliant on duties is both helpful and welcome. Additionally, and importantly, Magnani rightly reminds us that we are not entitled to forget or ignore the global-scale consequences of our localised actions, nor to reduce our moral obligations simply because they are embedded in complex systems (whether commercial, political or social) (pp.98-103). As such, Magnani should be congratulated on his attempt to promote knowledge and duty (and knowledge as duty) and to contemporise certain elements of moral thinking.

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